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ABSTRACT

This report, presented by the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education, proposes suggestions to the governor and legislature that would enhance the possibility of achieving proposed goals for improving workforce education and training services for the people of Alabama. The plan contains three main parts. First, that Alabama's two-year colleges will be organized to deliver high-quality, high-skill, accessible workforce education and training to Alabamians during the 21st century. This requires the 30 colleges to measure performance, teach skills that are demanded in the workforce, make training accessible throughout the state, place a high priority on adult education, and become technologically advanced. Second, Alabama's two-year colleges will maintain close and continuous relationships with employers to ensure high-quality service. To this end the colleges must understand the labor markets and skill requirements of employers and should create regional advisory councils to achieve the required relationship with employers. Third, Alabama's two-year colleges will work cooperatively with other employment and training agencies to enhance the development of Alabama's workforce. The Alabama Employment Service, the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs and The Alabama College System are all necessary to support the mission of workplace training. They should work together regionally, and with the governor, to improve coordination among local businesses, universities to achieve their goals. (AS)

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SHAPING ALABAMA'S TWO-YEAR COLLEGES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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A Report to Governor Don Siegelman

By the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education

June 4, 1999

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SHAPING ALABAMA'S TWO-YEAR COLLEGES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

A Report to Governor Don Siegelman
By the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education
June 4, 1999

On May 27, 1999, the Alabama State Board of Education adopted a plan that will position The Alabama College System and its 30 institutions to play a pivotal role in developing our state economically and increasing the educational attainment of our workforce during the 21st century. This plan is the culmination of a two-year study process that drew on the advice of a broad-based task force of Alabamians and the expertise of the south's premier workforce development consulting firm.

The message this plan sends to the Governor, the Legislature, and the people of Alabama is that the State Board of Education intends for The Alabama College System to focus on providing workforce education and training that is of the highest quality, accessible to all Alabamians, and related to their needs as well as those of the job market. The Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education enthusiastically accepts the challenge of adopting this focus and meeting the commitments it carries. We reach out to the business community of Alabama and call for the development of a partnership that will create a workforce education and training system that is second to none.

The Department and the institutions comprising The Alabama College System also understand that in adopting this focus on workforce education and training, we must develop strong working relationships with other agencies that have legitimate roles in the employment and training of Alabama's workers. Those relationships are in their beginning stages as Alabama enters the 21st century, but they will be strengthened through the implementation of the federal *Workforce Investment Act of 1998*, which must be ready to implement by July 1, 2000. We must learn to work together as the state's employment and training *team* – each agency playing its assigned role in concert with the others. We seek that cooperative and constructive relationship with other agencies important to the development of our state's workforce.

The Department and its institutions also understand that it is the role of the Governor to coordinate this employment and training team to provide optimum service to the people of Alabama. We are prepared to play our part on Alabama's employment and training team as the state's premier provider of workforce education and training. We believe our plan shapes Alabama's two-year colleges for this role, and we respectfully request that the Governor and Legislature consider adopting certain recommendations we have made to enhance the contribution we are able to make.

Our plan has three parts which are summarized on the following pages.

I.

Alabama's Two-Year Colleges Will Be Organized to Deliver High-Quality, High-Skill, Accessible Workforce Education and Training in the 21st Century.

Alabama's biggest economic development problem is the lack of educational attainment among the members of its workforce. This condition limits the earning potential of Alabama's workers, the size of the state's economy, and the attractiveness of the state as a place in which to do business. It is critical that the state's two-year colleges play a strong role in overcoming this impediment to the progress of Alabama and her people. Therefore, we commit ourselves to organize and operate Alabama's two-year colleges so that they will continue to deliver high-quality, high-skill, accessible workforce education and training to Alabamians during the 21st century.

We believe that the quality of our education and training offerings must be high enough that Alabamians will choose to enroll and Alabama's employers will demand our graduates. Therefore, we will seek to measure our performance – and succeed – in these terms. To enhance our reputation for effectiveness and efficiency, we will continue to merge two-year institutions whenever that would improve instructional quality, eliminate duplication, create economies of scale, and promote community values. All of our institutions will seek accreditation with the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. And we will develop feedback mechanisms so that we will know how students and employers perceive us and how well our graduates succeed in the world of work.

We believe that the skills we teach must be those that are demanded in the workplace and those that offer economic advancement for Alabama's workforce. Therefore, we will tailor our offerings to meet these requirements. This implies that we must be responsive to the needs of the workplace, changing instructional programs when necessary and matching training capabilities to the current demands of Alabama's employers. Our institutions will work within existing law to hire employees who can respond quickly and professionally to local workforce training needs. The State Board of Education, as the governing board of the two-year colleges, must have the flexibility to establish instructional programs and policies that are consistent with these priorities. To do this, it must be free of unnecessary administrative interference.

We believe that postsecondary workforce education and training must be accessible throughout the state if we are to succeed in our mission. Alabamians must have access to our institutions, and to the services they need to succeed in the workplace, wherever they live. Our governing board must have the latitude to pursue this mandate if we are to improve the skills of Alabama's workforce.

We believe that adult education must assume a higher policy priority in Alabama than it has had in the past. To improve the productivity of Alabama's workforce, each of our institutions will establish an Adult Education and Skills Division to offer courses in adult education, family literacy, developmental instruction, and skills training. In addition to literacy-related instruction, these divisions will assume the assessment services and courses currently administered by the Alabama Skills Centers.

We believe that the demands of the workplace call for baccalaureate programs in applied science and applied technology that are articulated with the associate degrees in applied science and applied technology offered by our two-year colleges. Athens State University will develop programs to meet this demonstrated need. To maximize the availability of its services within the System, Athens State University will develop the capability to offer baccalaureate degrees by distance learning.

We believe that our institutions must be technologically advanced to offer workforce education and training in the most effective and efficient ways. Therefore our institutions will develop instructional technology plans. As a System, we will develop the technological infrastructure to deliver instruction among institutions. We request the support of the Governor and the Legislature in developing methods of financing the improvement of technological capabilities within The Alabama College System. In particular, we ask for consideration of an incentive fund that will provide funds for purchasing technology and providing professional development to staff, in return for success in producing completions in programs leading to high-skill, high-wage employment.

II.

Alabama's Two-Year Colleges Will Maintain Close and Continuous Relationships With Employers to Ensure High-Quality Service.

The world of work is changing rapidly, and Alabama's two-year colleges must change with it. We believe that to educate and train Alabamians for the high-skill, high-paying jobs they need and deserve, The Alabama College System must understand the labor markets and the skill requirements of employers throughout the state. The only way to do this is to maintain a close and continuing dialogue with businesses and other employers. This requires the establishment of advisory councils.

The State Board of Education will create advisory councils to achieve the required relationship with employers. These advisory councils will provide feedback to the Governor and other members of the State Board on the responsiveness and quality of the workforce education and training provided by the two-year colleges. Regular exchange of information with these advisory councils will enable the State Board, the Department, and the colleges in the System to tailor program offerings so that they fill the needs of workers and the demands of the workplace.

We believe that these advisory councils must be regional, because Alabamians live and work in local communities that are tied together economically into several regions. The needs of employers and the educational levels of workers differ from region to region, and the two-year colleges must adapt to these differences. State law authorizes the Governor by executive order to define economic regions for planning purposes, and twelve planning regions have been in existence for a number of years. We believe that it is advantageous for The Alabama College System, as well as all other training and employment-related programs, to use these planning regions as the basis for developing a relationship with employers and workers. The common geographical boundaries will enhance the teamwork among agencies involved in improving Alabama's workforce.

We believe that the preferences of the Governor and other members of the State Board of Education should be taken into account in the appointment of regional advisory council members. The membership should come mainly from the business sector, because that is where most workers are employed and most jobs are created. However, these councils also should have room for representatives of hospitals, universities, labor, and other organizations who can inform the discussions and help improve two-year college programs. Members of the State Board of Education also should serve as *ex officio* members of regional advisory councils that cover counties included in their districts. The State Board of Education will structure regional advisory councils so that three-fourths of the members are from business, which will allow room to appoint others whose contribution is essential to the mission we seek to fulfill.

These regional advisory councils will serve without compensation. They will elect their own chairs and establish their own operating procedures. They will meet quarterly and will report to the Chancellor, who will report to the State Board. They will focus on workforce education and training issues in their respective regions, including adult education and literacy as well as education and training for high-skill, high-wage occupations.

III.

Alabama's Two-Year Colleges Will Work Cooperatively With Other Employment and Training Agencies to Enhance the Development of Alabama's Workforce.

We believe that the State of Alabama cannot succeed in its workforce development efforts unless all agencies involved in employment and training activities work productively, as a team, with each other and with local businesses and economic development agencies. The screening, assessment, and labor market information roles of the Alabama Employment Service are critical to the success of this effort, as are the training performance evaluation efforts of the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs. The vocational interest and skills assessment, prevocational and workplace readiness training, and the workforce education and training provided by The Alabama College System comprise the third leg of this triangle, and like the three legs of a stool, all three are necessary to support the whole mission.

To incorporate the necessary business and economic development support, these state activities must work together *regionally*. This necessity has been incorporated nationally into the framework of the *Workforce Investment Act of 1998*, which calls for local workforce investment boards to bring state employment and training agencies together with business and other representatives for the creation of effective workforce development programs. According to MDC, Inc., the south's foremost workforce development consulting firm, every one of Alabama's southeastern neighbor states plans to implement the *Workforce Investment Act* by creating some type of regional structure that will involve state agencies with local business and economic development representatives in the development of employment and training services.

We believe that Alabama also should develop a regional approach to the implementation of the *Workforce Investment Act*. Our research suggests that the twelve state planning regions already in place are the best geographical boundaries for such a regional approach. These regions are based on the economic realities of Alabama, and they are few enough in number to make a regional approach administratively feasible. We respectfully request that the Governor designate these regions as the boundaries of local workforce investment areas for Alabama.[1] We have designated them as the boundaries of our regional advisory councils so that The Alabama College System can work productively with businesses, economic development agencies, and other employment and training programs at the regional level.

The Governor fulfills a key coordinating role by designating the criteria for many of the members of local workforce investment boards. Federal law requires that each local workforce investment board contain a youth council to make recommendations for youth programs in the area. We believe that Alabama's local workforce investment boards should also have a training council to make recommendations on workforce education and training. We request that the Governor designate the members of the State Board of Education's regional advisory councils to serve on local workforce investment boards and constitute them as a training council. This would provide unified oversight and advice on workforce education and training issues within Alabama's regions. It would ensure that Alabama's two-year colleges are productive partners within the employment and training team of each region.

The regional advisory councils appointed by the State Board of Education also will be charged with improving coordination among local businesses, universities, and two-year colleges through The Alabama College System Centers for Excellence, and with assessing the effectiveness of the Alabama Technology Network in delivering workforce training. Within the System, the Alabama Industrial Development Training Institute can play a key role in working with two-year colleges on training and economic development issues.

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[1] The Birmingham and Mobile areas are eligible to be automatically designated as local workforce investment areas because of their previous status as service delivery areas under prior federal employment and training law. However, the Governor may require that such areas participate in an approach based on regional coordination.

Conclusion

This plan is intended to improve the provision of workforce education and training services to the people of Alabama. Our intent is to focus all of the energies of The Alabama College System toward meeting the goals we have laid out in the plan, and to cooperate to the fullest extent with others who have similar goals. We have made certain requests of the Governor and Legislature that would enhance our ability to achieve these aims. We appreciate the opportunity to make this presentation as a part of the Governor's decision-making process on workforce development issues.

In making this proposal, we have considered specific requirements of the *Workforce Investment Act* and can provide detailed correlation between our recommendations and the Act. We will produce them upon request.